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SUBJECT: KRG DIVIDED: SPECIAL ADVISOR KRAJESKI DISCUSSES CORRUPTION, MEDIA FREEDOM, AND MINORITY ISSUES WITH KURDISH AND YEZIDI LEADERS, PART I

REF: BAGHDAD 3587

Classified By: Classified by Deputy Political Counselor John Fox for Reasons 1.4 (a) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is an RRT Erbil reporting cable.

SUMMARY

¶2. (C) During Senior Advisor Krajeski's recent visit to the Kurdistan Region, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and non-KRG interlocutors suggested that the power struggle between the two dominant Kurdish political parties is very much alive, the KRG does not always respect press freedom, Kurdish fiscal corruption needs reform and Kurdish oppression of the Yezidi minority continues. KRG Intelligence Chief Masr'ur Barzani, former PUK member--now media mogul (and potential future PUK leader)--Nawshirwan Mustafa, PUK Politburo Chief Kosrat Rasul, and Yezidi Prince Tahsin Saeed Ali exchanged views with Krajeski on these and other issues. This cable details their comments on the items above; a subsequent cable will address their and others' comments on KRG relations with the Government of Iraq (GOI) regarding upcoming provincial elections, and the status of article 140 and Kirkuk. END SUMMARY.

PRESS FREEDOM AND THE MURDER OF A KIRKUKI JOURNALIST

¶3. (C) Thomas Krajeski, Senior Advisor to Ambassador Crocker for Northern Iraq, visited KRG and non-KRG leaders in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah on November 25-26. Masr'ur Barzani believed that the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) is plotting against him and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), particularly in the case of the recent assassination of journalist Soran Hama, who reported on KRG-abetted corruption in the publication Lvin. Barzani denied any knowledge of rumored arrests in this case, but alleged that Hama's murder was orchestrated by the PUK in order to discredit him and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

¶4. (C) He expressed the KRG's support for a rigorous investigation into Hama's murder, but alleged that the international community places greater importance on the murder of an independent journalist than on the murder of a KRG-employed journalist. He said "It seems that the lives of those who criticize the government are more valuable than those who support it. Every life is precious, even those who support the government." Barzani held that "many are seeking to undermine the success of the KRG through the media and this incident." Ambassador Krajeski agreed that protection of all journalists was critical, but pressed Barzani to continue to rigorously pursue the perpetrators of Hama's murder.

¶5. (C) Kurdish media mogul Nawshirwan Mustafa also denied

any knowledge of arrests in Hama's murder, but he emphatically laid complete responsibility for the murder at the feet of Masr'ur Barzani and the KDP. When pressed, Mustafa admitted that he had no evidence to support his claim. However, he dismissed the need for evidence saying "Most of the leaders of the IRA were known to the British government, but they did not arrest them," due to a lack of conclusive evidence.

¶6. (C) On the subject of press freedom in general, Mustafa said that there were other pressures on journalists, including the common practice of refusing to pay salaries and firing them at will. He also said that it was nearly impossible for independent Kurdish journalists to compete with KDP- and PUK-controlled media: "The political parties employ (a combined total of) 8000 people. It is very difficult to compete with such mass media." Qdifficult to compete with such mass media."

¶7. (C) Kosrat Rasul, Vice President of the KRG and Politburo Chief of the PUK, also had no information regarding arrests in relation to Soran Hama's murder. However, he spoke at length on how antithetical to Kurdish ideals Hama's murder was. He condemned the murder, saying "For 37 years, the Ba'ath party denied the Kurds freedom of speech. We must not now turn around and do the same to other Kurds."

KRG CORRUPTION

¶8. (C) Discussing KRG corruption generally, Rasul claimed that the KRG urgently needs fiscal transparency in budget

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execution. Even he, the Vice President of the KRG, does not know how the regional budget is spent. He maintains that "we should publish the budget in the media. Until we do so, we have no defense against corruption." Noting the great disparity of wealth and service provision within the KRG, Rasul admitted that "the first entity that needs to be cleansed of corruption is the KRG Council of Ministers. We (ministers) live much better than others."

KURDISH POLITICAL PARTIES

¶9. (C) In the aforementioned meeting with Nawshirwan Mustafa, he asked several pointed questions about potential USG support for the formation of a third political party in Kurdistan. Intimating that he was considering forming such a party, he highlighted the necessity of breaking up the KDP's and PUK's monopoly on politics within the KRG. (NOTE: Mustafa is believed by many to be a contender for PUK leadership after President Jalal Talabani. END NOTE). Ambassador Krajeski declared that the USG supports democratic processes and the development of civil society, both of which could be well served by a greater plurality within the political sphere. However, he firmly stated that the USG does not support specific political parties, the formation of which is for the people of Iraq to decide.

KURDISH PRESSURE ON THE YEZIDI MINORITY

¶10. (C) Yezidi Prince Tahsin Ali warned that "like snow in the sunshine," the Yezidi community will melt under KDP pressure to control the ethnic and religious composition of disputed territories in Ninewa (where most of the Yezidis live). The Prince asserted that KDP officials in disputed areas of Ninewa such as Shexan are forcibly transferring property from Yezidi to Kurdish ownership. According to Tahsin Ali, this occurs despite the Yezidis' legal ownership of the land, detailed in official documents. These land

transfers take place outside the government-sanctioned legal mechanisms of the property restitution committees.

¶11. (C) Tahsin Ali believes that the KDP intends to raise the proportion of Kurds in these areas high enough to win KRG control in any future referenda in Ninewa. However in doing so, he contends that they are wiping the Yezidi community off the map. This, in conjunction with other pressures, such as weak employment and low crop prices, forces Yezidis to emigrate to Turkey, Europe, and elsewhere. Ambassador Krajeski encouraged Tahsin Ali to meet with the UNAMI committee on Disputed Internal Boundaries and express his concerns to them.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) We are surprised at Masr'ur Barzani's firm denial of any knowledge of the arrest of two suspects in the murder of Soran Hama. Just two weeks ago, an official in the office of KRG Prime Minister Nechervan Barzani (Masr'ur's cousin and brother-in-law) had confirmed the arrest to us, and assured us that the PM would lead an investigation (reftel). Masr'ur was either lying or he had not been informed of the arrest by the PM's office--which would be odd considering Masr'ur's position as Chief of KDP security. Regardless of who knows what about the Hama case, we will continue to push for a full investigation. As S/A Krajeski told Masr'ur Barzani privately following the official meeting: "This case will not go away." END COMMENT.

CROCKER